

IN THE OPEN CODE¹

By BURTON KLINE

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THE day's work was finished and the entire job well started. I felt sure we should meet old Bankard's wishes fully. The rare old Virginia manor and its wooded park were going to look again as the original designer meant them to appear. Gordon, I know, agreed with me—Gordon, who was to restore the house as I restored the grounds.

That evening he and I were sitting on a rusted iron bench in a corner of the park that looked off over the hills, watching the summer dusk steal up the eastern sky. I still wanted to talk of the day's accomplishment, but Gordon seemed to have grown—I was going to say dreamy, but he was watchful instead.

Presently he drew out his watch and said, "In just about four minutes you will hear it."

"Hear what?"

"See that notch between those two hills about a mile and a half away over there?" He pointed. "Keep your eye on that."

"A blast?"

"Yes, a blast. But not the kind you think. Just watch."

We smoked in silence, and my curiosity was about to break into speech again, or ebb altogether, when it happened.

An ordinary freight train passed, but the locomotive, as it emerged from the flat hillside and traversed the

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broad notch, let off a stream of white puffs from its whistle, and then disappeared behind the other hill, precisely like an episode on the stage.

In a moment the white puffs translated themselves from a sight in the eye to a sound in the ear. And I tell the truth when I say that they reproduced, with a mimicry that was startling, the notes of the last two bars of "Annie Laurie."

"What do you make of that!" Gordon turned and exulted to me over his odd little discovery.

"How did you get on to it?"

"Oh, stumbled across it the first evening we were here. It goes every day at this time, as regular as clock-work."

"Some engineer with a sense of humor amusing himself," I conjectured.

"But regularity is n't amusement. He blows it every day at this time. And always in the same way."

I tried another hypothesis. "A code signal of some sort, most likely."

"But what an odd code! What a poetic code, for a railroad!"

"Well, I've learned to expect a good deal of life in Virginia. It seems to be different here."

"Yes, it's a code. . . . Of course it's a code!" Gordon amended himself. "But—I wonder if it's a railroad code?"

"I see. A lover and his lass, eh? You're crediting your railroad engineer with your own romantic soul, Gordon." I patted his arm, as Jemima, our cook, rang her bell for supper. "Now there's a code that I can understand!" And we hurried in to the table.

By next evening the whole gang had heard of the curious signal from the freight locomotive and assembled at the opening of the trees to hear it. Precisely at the moment due the obedient freight train crossed the notch in the distant hills, and as precisely as before the engine let off its string of puffs that in a moment became in our ears those last two bars of the song.

There were as many theories to account for it as there were men to hear it. In the end the congress bore down Gordon and pronounced it a simple railroad code, with

the longs and shorts accidentally resembling the tune, or made so by a whimsical engineer.

Nevertheless the phenomenon was interesting enough to compel a bit of discussion about the fire in the great hall after we had despatched our supper. The talk drifted away into the curious tricks that artisans come to play with their implements — carpenters able to toss up edged tools and catch them deftly, and the like. But Gordon was not to be weaned from the subject of that whistle.

“There’s nothing to prevent that engineer from playing ‘Yankee Doodle’ on his whistle if he wants to. Haven’t you often lain awake at night listening to the blasts of the locomotives? You can tell when an engineer is ruffled, when he starts behind time out of the yard, and knows he must be extra alert that night. His toot is sharp and impatient. Or you can tell an engineer coming home from his run. His whistle fairly sighs his own contentment.”

“La, Gordon,” some one yawned, “you’re a poetic soul!”

“Well, I believe in that engineer,” he defended. “Next time I go down to the village I’m going to find out who blows that thing and why he does it.”

He did go down to the village and he did learn the secret of the whistle. It made a neat little story. The whistle was a code signal, of a surety, and of precisely the sort that Gordon figured it was. He knew his Virginia.

A fellow named George Roberts was the engineer of that freight, and his imitation of “Annie Laurie” was truly a signal — to a sweetheart of his. Rough devil at one time, this man Roberts, a tearing drinker and fighter, he was fast on the way to ruin and discharge, when he fell in love with this girl and braced up. Now every time he passed the little house where she lived he tooted his whistle like that in salutation.

“To let her know he’s safe,” Gordon finished.

Of course we charged him with making it up, but in the end we came to believe him. Every day for four weeks that whistle blew, always in the same way, always

in the same place, and always on the dot. And somehow it had a sobering and softening effect upon the crowd of woodsmen that we were. The men quarreled less frequently, I noticed, were more considerate and helpful to each other. I swear we all felt the influence of that engineer. I'll wager every man jack of us meant on going home to be a bit the more thoughtful to the wife. It cheered us all, that little touch of honest romance. The world seemed a bit the better for it. We even took to timing our supper not by Jemima's bell but by George Roberts' whistle.

Then another strange thing happened. The signal ceased.

The first time we missed it we could scarcely believe our ears. But on the second day it was silent, and the next. At the right time the train crossed the notch, but no puffs came from the engine, no sound from the whistle.

It gave us a drop. The world was as drab as ever. The cynics, of course, spoke up at once.

"Guess your friend the engineer is no better than the rest of us," one of them jeered at Gordon. "He could n't keep it up."

"Drunk again, probably," jeered another.

"Maybe it's only a little lovers' tiff," I argued in Gordon's support.

"I'm going to find out," Gordon finished the discussion.

And he did. Made a special errand to the village to find out. And returned with a smile.

"They're married," he reported. "Off on their honeymoon. They'll be back in a week. Watch for the signal then."

He was right. In a week the signal was resumed, but in another place.

"How's that?" one of the men still girded at Gordon. "Guess he's learned to respect his wife's throwing arm. He pipes up now from a more respectful distance."

"That's easy," Gordon let the caviller down gently. "He's set her up in a little house farther along the line. Naturally that's where he would whistle now."

For three weeks more we heard the faithful signal, at its new place. A little more faintly, but always punctual, always the same. And again the men began to whistle at their work.

By then the job was nearly finished. In two or three weeks more we should be leaving, and the whole crowd began to allege a touch of regret. They protested it was because the old place was so beautiful, but privately I think George Roberts and his tooting had something to do with the homesickness. To whatever new place we might go, however pleasant it might be, there was going to be a trifle that was lacking.

Then again a strange thing happened. Again the whistle stopped. For four days it was silent.

"Family jar already!" came the usual good-natured jeer.

"She's flung a plate and crippled his whistle arm."

"Guess you'd better find out what's the matter, Gordon," a third man recommended.

"I will," said Gordon.

That evening he returned from the village without the smile. Nevertheless, as he was still plodding up the long driveway, his head down, his step slow, we actually heard the whistle as we sat waiting for Gordon under the portico. There was no mistaking it. And yet its note seemed different; there was a new tone to it, something like Gordon's air. And it seemed to come from still farther away.

Gordon paused as he heard it, and stood still, with his hat in his hand, till it died away. Then he came up the steps and sat down. We all leaned toward him.

"She fell ill," he said. "They left her in the little cemetery down the line. She'd always been delicate. And I suppose that's where he's whistling now. To—to let her know he's safe."